

Twenty-five Years Later: The Questions

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In the history of anthropology, certain years are associated, or ought to be associated, with the appearance of books that made a difference to the discipline, for example 1922 (Malinowski's *Argonauts*), 1928 (Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*), 1949 (Lévi-Strauss's *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*), 1968 (Harris's *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*). In similar fashion, 1986 was the year of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986), the year that something we called "postmodernism" (a term as elastic as the existentialism of a previous decade) took centre stage. Arguably for the first time, the selection of field sites, the process of fieldwork (and the power relations intrinsic to it) and the rhetoric of ethnography became the focus of theoretical talk rather than diachronic processes such as evolution and supposed synchronic structures. Key notions such as *culture* and *the field* (particularly after Gupta and Ferguson's *Anthropological Locations* in 1997) were bracketed and questioned. Polyvocality–polyphony replaced unabashed ethnographic authority as a desideratum. There were experiments with ethnographic form, merging ethnography as a fictive form with "pure" fiction. The new orthodoxy (that was not) declared the comparative method dead along with instrumental reason and scientific pretence. One is perfectly aware that there never was a united "postmodernist" movement in anthropology, that there were Foucauldians, Derrideans, devotees of the Frankfurt School, pragmatists, practitioners of the anthropology of experience, students of Turner and Geertz, some of the above, all of the above and none of the above.

Those who rejected "the posts" included latter-day Boasians, structural-functionalists, many psychological and cognitive anthropologists, neo-Marxists who practised anthropological political economy, symbolic and structural anthropologists, cultural materialists, cultural ecologists and sociobiologists. In other words, this diverse

group shared little in common, except that they all clung to some vision of anthropology as a comparative science, albeit only the cultural materialists and some cognitive anthropologists were diehard positivists. Among the critics of the movement numbered Marvin Harris (1998) for every reason one could imagine, many followers of Eric Wolf, Roy d'Andrade (1995) who was particularly upset by the postmodernism of Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Herbert Lewis (1998) who felt that the gains of the Boasian movement (such as the scientific dismissal of racism) were in danger of obloquy at the hands of a movement that seemed (to him) intent on misrepresenting anthropology's past, Marshall Sahlins (the first major anthropologist to utilize the work of Baudrillard) who has criticized inappropriate extensions of Foucauldian notions beyond the specific context of early modernity which they were used to describe (Sahlins 2002), and Tom Beidelman who stated that the doubting of ethnographic authority was "a failure of moral nerve" (1986:10). After 25 years one must ask how lasting the effect of postmodernism has been? Were its proponents or its critics right? To what extent has it been absorbed into the mainstream, whatever that mainstream may be? Is there a new empiricism, more concerned with the actual circumstances of globalization, global flows and world crises than with any grand theory or grand anti-theory? Indeed, is there any sign of a new theoretical movement that will create the same stir as *Writing Culture* or, from a different perspective, 1968's *Rise of Anthropological Theory*?

There is another set of questions that Canadians might ask. Only one Canadian (something few noticed?) and only one woman (something many rightly remarked) contributed to *Writing Culture*—Mary Louise Pratt from Listowel, Ontario, who is not an anthropologist *stricto sensu*. Those who recall meetings from that time know that English-speaking Canadians, such as Michael Lambek (1991), Stanley Barrett (1996: 150-163) and Regna Darnell were very much involved in these debates. In Québec, there was a more muted reaction—perhaps here we could talk of two (anthropological) solitudes.

We invited a number of scholars to contribute mini-articles or short commentaries on the theme "25 Years Later," which might or might not react to the thoughts outlined above, but would address the fortune of postmodernism in anthropology.

The responses we got could not have been more diverse. We received two short articles. Michael Fischer offers us a polyphonic, nine-canto *Singspiel*, a whimsical, imaginary reprise of the Santa Fe conference that led to the publication of *Writing Culture* with a *dramatis personae* that seems to bear some kind of resemblance to the

original cast. Like most humour, the *Singspiel* has a serious purpose: to fend off what Fischer perceives to be "mis-readings, misapprehensions, misappropriations" of the book in the years immediately following its publication. The *Singspiel* is preceded by an introduction, and the piece discusses some more recent works by the author and some other participants in the conference. Michael Lambek undertook to revise and reshape an unpublished essay for this volume, evaluating three approaches to anthropological inquiry, based to some degree on Alasdair MacIntyre's "Three Rival versions of Moral Inquiry" (1990). These are Encyclopaedia (objectivist), Genealogy (sceptical) and Tradition (hermeneutical). Very obviously, anthropological postmodernism epitomized by some essays in *Writing Culture* emphasizes Genealogy over Tradition and tends to eschew Encyclopaedia. Despite his own hermeneutic bent, Lambek sees the anthropology of the future as based on an interplay between these three approaches which, unlike MacIntyre, he does not view as mutually exclusive.

There are four commentaries. Stanley Barrett approves of the turn to reflexivity and understands that the crisis of representation was a necessary consequence of the end of colonialism, the Vietnam War, globalization and new forms of mass communication. However, he considers the "experimental moment" a failure, because, in his view, little of value has emerged from "either dialogical texts or mixed genres." In Barrett's view, a renascent empiricism, based in good ethnography, could reinvigorate anthropology. However, Regna Darnell, who has been a referee, for several Turner prizes, considers that the movement toward experimental ethnography, which is postmodernism's legacy, has not been a failure. Our bricoleur's "toolkit has been substantially expanded by postmodernism." Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart believe that, despite a tendency sometimes to produce pretentious, solipsistic critiques, postmodernism brought a moment of healthy scepticism to the theory and practice of anthropology. The movement "from Saussure to not so sure" was beneficial. Finally, Alan Smart, who was never a postmodernist, observes that anthropological postmodernism was and is in spirit a humanistic movement inspired by eclectic traditions like postmodernist architecture and that it does not preach the "death of the subject" like so many forms of post-structuralism. However, it is his view that the anthropology of the future will be "post-human." It must transcend the anthropomorphism that predominates in most theory and ethnography and break down the barriers between humans and their environment, some part of which we have fashioned into a prosthetic extension of ourselves, and particularly between

humans and other living organisms with which we share and exchange genetic material.

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A Polyphonic Nine Canto *Singspiel* after 25 Years of *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*

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Introduction: Historical Horizons, Emergent Futures

1. *Rhizomes*

From a Rice University perspective, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986, henceforth ACC), *Writing Culture* (1986, henceforth WC), the inauguration of the journal *Cultural Anthropology* (1986) under George Marcus' editorship, along with the Center for Cultural Studies (CCS) (which I directed 1987-93 and which grew out of the

Rice Circle), and the eight volumes in the 1990s of the *Late Editions* series were organic, rhizomatic, parts of one another. ACC in particular was a reading of our generation's effort to produce ethnographies that marked out somewhat new terrains and approaches, such as, for instance, attention to dream analysis and small group dynamics in Amazonian bands (Kracke 1978), or the sonic phenomenological and cosmological-moral critical apparatuses of New Guinea (Feld 1982). Both of these required readers to engage in the cultural and strategic richness of local knowledges as they would with their own, including changing sensibilities about location in larger than local worlds. Above all, we insisted that anthropology get past the silly polemics about materialist versus symbolic or interpretive approaches, since both are required, particularly in a changing world where both are contested and reworked. While ACC was a call for renewal of